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AFGHANISTAN

SUCCESS STORY

Community Cultural Centers Protect Citizens' Rights

Centers provide information about access to justice and how to use the judicial system



Photo: USAID/ARoLP

Community Cultural Center volunteers distribute outreach materials about access to justice and women's rights in Parwan Province.

The 34 Community Cultural Centers established by USAID are helping Afghanistan's citizens learn about, and protect, their legal rights.

As Afghanistan's justice system matures, it offers citizens numerous options for legal recourse when their rights are violated. However, many people, especially women, do not know their legal rights or how to use the formal justice system. Additionally, many do not know where to turn when they face legal problems that could be effectively solved through the courts or community mediation.

To bridge the gap between Afghans and the justice system, USAID has established 34 Community Cultural Centers in six of the country's provinces. The newest center, located in Kunduz, was opened in February 2009. The centers rely on trained local volunteers to educate their fellow citizens about their legal rights and how to defend their rights in Afghanistan's formal and informal justice systems.

The centers reach out to the local communities that they serve. Using a variety of public education materials including comic books, pamphlets, and multimedia CDs, the centers spread information on access to justice, particularly for women and children, to schools, health clinics, local councils, police stations, and NGOs. Center volunteers also provide legal referrals and information on human rights and fair trial principles.

The Community Cultural Centers have had a tangible positive impact on the lives of Afghans who seek information and resources there. For example, one center recently helped a young woman leave a forced marriage, legally and with the blessing of her community.

A nineteen-year old woman from Panjsher Province was forced into marriage by her parents. Villagers who sympathized with her came to a Community Cultural Center for information on her legal rights. They learned that both the Constitution of Afghanistan and *Sharia* law prohibit forced marriage. The villagers discussed her situation with the head of the center, who is also an Imam at the local mosque. The Imam and the villagers brought her case to the village elders council, and she was granted a divorce based on the correct interpretation of her rights.

This positive outcome is one of many – other Afghan citizens have used the centers to prepare successfully for trials in court or to educate themselves about women's rights. Residents now consider their Community Cultural Centers an essential resource to learn about, and protect, their rights.

USAID's Afghanistan Rule of Law Project (ARoLP) builds the capacity of the public justice sector, increases access to justice, particularly for women, and strengthens public demand for rule of law. From 2005-2008, ARoLP has produced and broadcast more than 1,000 minutes of national- and provincial-level radio and television programming on access to justice, and has published and distributed more than 4.1 million public outreach materials through its 34 Community Cultural Centers.